

16 Days against Gender-Based Violence Campaign

On September 28, the world awoke to fresh reports of unspeakable violence against women. In Guinea, the “berets rouges,” the Presidential guard, raped women of all ages – in groups, with weapons, and with such brutality that many who weren’t immediately killed died soon afterwards of their injuries.

Neither the scale nor the scope of this violence are new. For the past ten years, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, soldiers have been raping and mutilating women as part of a deliberate and coordinated strategy to destroy civilian communities. And gender-based violence is not limited to war zones or regions in conflict. Girls and women are targeted because of their sex at every point in their lives, from female feticide, to inadequate healthcare and nutrition given to girls, to child marriage, trafficking, so-called “honor” killings, dowry-related murder, and the neglect and ostracism of widows – and this is not an exhaustive list.

This violence is a global pandemic. It cuts across ethnicity, race, class, religion, educational level, and international borders: the only common element is that the victims are selected because they are women.

Since 1991, the world has set aside the 16 days that link November 25, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, with December 10, International Human Rights Day, to underscore the idea that violence committed against women because of their sex is a fundamental violation of human rights. This violence is not “cultural”; it is criminal. It is every nation’s problem, and it needs a response that is commensurate with the seriousness of these crimes.

The assaults on women cannot be blamed on a few aberrant perpetrators. Rather, these diverse forms of violence stem from the entrenched and enduring low status of women and girls around the world. Ending the violence – treating the causes as well as the symptoms – requires not only that we increase prosecutions of perpetrators but also that we work towards women’s complete equality in every sphere of life.

Gender-based violence is not solely a women’s issue; it is a global challenge to human rights and security. As an international problem, it requires international solutions. And the United States is committed to working with governments, multilateral institutions, and a wide range of private partners – from activists and advocates, to survivors and civil society leaders – to end impunity for those who perpetrate these crimes, and to ensure that laws that recognize women’s equality and right to be free from violence are implemented fully. We’re working to promote men’s engagement in ending the violence. We’re asking religious leaders to incorporate these messages, so consistent with all faiths, into their activities and outreach. And we’re helping to ensure that boys and girls in all nations have safe and equal access to high-quality education that teaches the intrinsic worth of each person.

Secretary Clinton has made this issue a top priority for American foreign policy. And the Obama Administration is also committed to ending violence against women in the United States, where too many women are still mistreated and abused.

Women are the key to progress and prosperity in the 21st century. When they are marginalized and mistreated, humanity cannot progress. When they are accorded their rights and afforded equal opportunities in education, health care, employment, and political participation, they lift up their families, their communities, and their nations.

It is time that ending violence against women became a priority for us all.